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A United Nations aid agency came under sharp criticism on Thursday from a bipartisan group of U.S lawmakers who assert it has violated requirements for neutrality, and provided assistance to Hamas, which the United States considers a terrorist organization. The accusations are aimed at the U.N. Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees.

The United States remains the single largest donor to UNRWA, the U.N. agency that employs about 24,000 staff helping 4.5 million refugees in the Palestinian Territories, as well as Arab countries.

The United States provided \$148 million to UNRWA in the 2008 fiscal year, and \$140 million of the \$900 million the U.S. pledged at the recent international conference on Gaza will go to the organization

But 22 Democrats and Republicans in the House of Representatives are supporting a non-binding resolution calling on the United Nations to take immediate steps to ensure that the agency is not providing funding, employment or other support to terrorists.

Steve Rothman, a New Jersey Democrat, is the main sponsor of the resolution, which says UNRWA employed officials and activists from Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, from the 1980s through 2003.

"Funding from Hamas was received [by UNRWA] in the form salaries, by various Hamas terrorists, where terrorists were educated in UNRWA schools and of course, UNRWA schools have been known to and are continuing to include textbooks, videotapes and other materials which not only slander the state of Israel but also are virulently anti-semitic," he said.

It cites what it calls reports that Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh and the former Hamas chief Abd al-Azis Rantisi, who was killed in an Israel attack in Gaza in 2005, both graduated

from UNRWA schools.

Representative Mark Kirk is among the 11 Republicans who have joined 11 Democrats supporting the resolution so far.

"UNRWA has hired apparently staff who stood as candidates on the Hamas ticket, were defeated at the election box, and then came back to the service of the United Nations," he said.

The resolution states that UNRWA operations lack accountability and transparency to ensure the agency is not violating terms of the 1961 U.S. Foreign Assistance Act which requires that U.S. funds do not support terrorism.

It also says UNRWA should be required to implement screening procedures, including terrorist name recognition software, to ensure that staff, volunteers and beneficiaries are neither terrorists nor affiliated with known terrorist organizations.

And it says UNRWA should make copies of all educational materials used in its schools accessible on the Internet.

Republican Congresswoman Sue Myrick says enhanced transparency is only common sense, and echoes other lawmakers who say Americans facing economic hardships don't want their money supporting terrorists in any way.

"We [U.S. taxpayers] give not just to this agency, but the U.N. in general, a huge amount of money and it seems to be rampant throughout that there is no accountability and transparency," she said.

Congressman Rothman says he is encouraged by recent conversations with the Obama administration which although not explicitly backing the resolution, made clear it supports steps to require more accountability and transparency for UNRWA.

"They pledge that on their watch they will work as hard as they possibly can to make certain that none of our U.S. taxpayer dollars go to any terrorist organization, including Hamas," he said.

Asked about the non-binding nature of the resolution, Congressman Rothman says lawmakers believe its essential intent will make its way into actual legislation considered by Congress regarding assistance to the Palestinians.